

Common Issues that Coexist with Asperger's

If a student in your class has been diagnosed with Asperger's, as a teacher you must be cognizant of the many issues that may coexist with the disorder. Many coexisting conditions you may already be familiar with, however many others you may not be aware even exist. Take the time to educate yourself. Small changes in your classroom environment and in your behavior can make a big difference, not only for the child with Asperger's but for you and the other students in your classroom too.

Asperger's can coexist with a number of other difficulties, including but not limited:

- ADD/ADHD
- Learning disabilities (particularly dysgraphia, or difficulty with writing)
- Tourette's Syndrome/tic disorders
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Bipolar disorder
- Fine and gross motor difficulties
- Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Sensory integration dysfunction
- Central auditory processing difficulties

It is very common for Asperger's to coexist with ADD/ADHD, anxiety, and depression. Anxiety and depression are often seen as secondary problems caused by the social difficulties and exclusion of Asperger's students by their peers.

As a teacher, you already know many great strategies for helping a child with ADD/ADHD to succeed in the classroom, whether it be silent visual cues to refocus, rubber bands on the leg of the chair to bounce their feet on, stress ball in the desk to squeeze their energy into, brain breaks to avoid a break down, or use of graphic organizers or lists to keep them organized. Similarly for learning disabilities such as dysgraphia, where you can provide handouts to avoid excessive note taking, allow essays to be dictated or presented orally, use of speech to text technology, modify assignments, etc. However, when it comes to sensory issues, teachers are generally not fully aware of them and really don't understand what it means to have a hyper sensitivity. Teachers generally have no idea of the simple changes they can make that will make a world of difference to someone with these issues.

Sensory Issues

Be cognizant of sensory issues. Some people do not take a child's complaint of sensory issues seriously and these children are frequently told just to ignore whatever is bothering them. These issues may either be due to hypersensitivity or due to a processing problem. The problem is that we, the neurotypical people, think in terms of how we perceive that sound, smell, or feeling rather than how the child is experiencing it. For example, we are generally unaware of the seam in our socks and even if it does happen to bother us, it is mildly irritating and we can ignore it. However to a child with hyper sensitivity, it can feel to them that they have a razor blade in their sock, it physically hurts them! Put yourself in their shoes, imagine you have a razor blade in your sock that is causing you physical pain, you ask someone to help you and they tell you to just ignore it and get on with your work. Think you might

feel a little frustrated? Imagine working in a dark office and the only light source is your desk lamp that keeps flashing off and on continually while making a loud buzzing sound, you can't leave and go to another office, and you are expected to get the same amount of work accomplished as everyone else who has normal lamps. Imagine how frustrated you would feel, imagine the headache you would have, then imagine not being allowed to leave the office for lunch because you have to work through lunch to catch up with the work you didn't finish this morning like everyone else. When we put it in these terms, it seems ludicrous. However, that exact scenario happens to children everyday who can't focus because of sensitivity to fluorescent lights, and they miss recess to catch up on their work, missing their only chance of the day to escape from the constant buzz or flash.

Sensory issues are real. It has been proven that people with sensory issues have abnormal circuits between different brain regions, having more circuits at the back of the brain than in a neurotypical brain and less in frontal cortex. Not only does this lead to greater incidence of sensory issues, but with less connection with the frontal cortex there is less self-control and use of judgment. The reactions that these students have to certain stimuli are beyond their control. Do not dismiss their discomfort as it is very real, you must accommodate it and/or help them overcome it.

- Accommodations

1. Be aware that fluorescent lights cause major issues for some ranging from mildly distracting to causing words to jiggle around on the page making reading impossible. If class has fluorescent light, minimize issue by moving affected child to a seat by window for natural light and/or providing desk lamp with traditional bulb (not new twisty ones – just as bad as fluorescent)
2. Experiment with different color paper (pastel often help), colored glasses (experiment with cheap sunglasses with colored lenses), wear hat in class to block fluorescent lights, etc.
3. Use laptops or tablets rather than a desktop with monitor, the screens work in a different way and are less likely to cause issues
4. If you must use a regular desktop computer and monitor, experiment with background color and brightness on the screen to find the optimal settings
5. I-pad is excellent for typing – screen works for these kids plus fact can type on screen (see keys and what typed without moving head/focus to screen, very useful)
6. Be aware that loud noises can be painful to some people with hypersensitivity. While ultimately you want to encourage students to overcome the issues (see below), in the short term try to be cognizant of the issue in planning activities for your classroom. Warn student ahead of time that there is going to be a fire drill so that they are prepared, allow to wear noise cancelling headphones for very noisy activities (but do not allow over use as this will exacerbate the problem), allow child to be in charge of volume control for movie or music in the classroom, etc.
7. May have auditory processing issue, where although hearing test are normal the information is not processed correctly. This may result in them missing out parts of speech, e.g. missing hard consonants, ending sounds, etc. The result is that what they hear can seem to them like bad cell phone connection! Be sure to talk slowly and clearly. Encourage the child to look at your face when talking. Although eye contact is difficult for children on the autism spectrum, there is a much greater likelihood of successful communication if the child looks at your mouth as you talk. Provide written directions wherever possible so that the child has something to

refer back to, this greatly increases the likelihood that they will understand your directions and follow through with the task.

8. Be aware that these children often have issues screening out background noise which can make it difficult to follow conversations in crowd, directions in classroom, etc. In the classroom, ensure that the room is quiet before giving directions. In group discussions, model appropriate turn taking by using an object such as a toy microphone or stuffed animal that is passed from speaker to speaker, only the person holding the object may address the group. Model how to be a good listener, looking at the speakers face, etc. This is good practice for all students but will help the child with sensory issues to focus on the speaker and will increase the likelihood of them following the discussion.
9. Be cognizant of the fact that an inability to screen out background noise can lead to sensory overload. If you notice that a child has meltdowns or is very unsettled after being in a noisy environment such as the lunch room, an assembly, etc., maybe hypersensitivity to sound is to blame.
10. Fear is the main emotion of people on the autism spectrum, the fear center of the brain is many times larger than normal. Don't dismiss seemingly irrational fears.

- Overcome

1. Sound sensitivity can be very restrictive in life, help your child increase their tolerance to noise so that they can function in the world. Children can slowly build up their tolerance to noise by gradually increasing their exposure to noise and in turn the volume of that noise. Most likely to be successful if you put the child in control of volume, allow them to feel in charge, help them to help themselves. Example an autistic child wanted to play instrument and be in band but had noise sensitivity. In time they learned to tolerate their own instrument, then introduced playing with another child with their instrument, then another, etc. until built up tolerance. The child now plays in a band!
2. Touch sensitivity is something very common with many children on the autism spectrum but it is important that we help them overcome this so they can learn to enjoy affection, which in turn helps develop feelings of kindness.
3. Do not to avoid places that cause issues, e.g. lunch room. Often it is easier to have child go elsewhere during a lunch to avoid possible sensitivities, but that is not doing the child any favors in long run, they must build up tolerance. Take child, and allow them to leave after two minutes first time if necessary, repeat until they build up a tolerance. This is essential if they are going to be functional adult and survive in the real world.

These sensory issues can cause a lot of frustration for children with Asperger's and may result in a range of behaviors from shutting down, to avoidance tactics, to anger from mild to full scale rage. Don't lose sight of the fact that while being on the spectrum may be the reason for these behaviors, they are not an excuse for them. Having a disability does not give a child the right to behave badly so you must teach students how to channel their reaction to a socially acceptable outlet. It is ok to be upset, but it is not okay to shout at someone. It is ok to feel overwhelmed, but it is not ok to throw things. Specifically teach coping strategies to calm themselves, whether it is sitting in pre designated relaxation corner, listening to music for five minutes, square breathing, tracing lines (see attachment), etc.